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Catholic male clergy and their relationship with women (XVI-XVII century).  
Aristocratic behaviors and ecclesiastical precepts

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*Catholic male clergy and their relationship with women (sixteenth-seventeenth century). Aristocratic codes of behavior and ecclesiastical precepts. A broad view<sup>1</sup>*

### *The Council of Trent: balls and plays*

The Council of Trent seems to us a dramatic and terribly serious event, and so it undeniably was. Yet, as still happens nowadays with serious, important international meetings between scientists, or politicians and diplomats, the men convened at Trent – mostly churchmen, let's remember – could enjoy entertainments and refined conversation: “lavish banquets, magnificent feasts”, balls and plays.<sup>2</sup> If truth be told, we can barely imagine that so austere an assembly could also contemplate worldly amusements, but they did indeed happen, and some evidence of them survives. Mention of this fact is not intended to feed appetites for history concocted from scandals or anecdotes. Its purpose is rather to help define the broader cultural context – morals and manners, mentality and psychology – in which historians need to place an event like the Council of Trent and its leading figures.

In March 1546,[...]the Prince-bishop of Trent, Cristoforo Madruzzo, enquired of the pontifical legates whether he had behaved properly by inviting his guests of honor at a family wedding, which included one archbishop and three bishops, to open the dancing. Giovanni Del Monte (future Pope Julius III, 1550-55) replied that had he been there, were it not for his accursed gout he would have danced himself, while Reginald Pole affirmed that he, too, would have joined the dance, holding his female partner in his arms according to the custom of the English court! Only Marcello Cervini (future Pope Marcellus II, 1555) indignantly replied that such affairs were beneath episcopal dignity and would only serve to provide ammunition for the enemies of the Council<sup>3</sup>.

In 1561 the last session of the Council was presided over by cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, a highly educated person endowed with excellent political gifts, an uncommon religious sensibility (in times doomed to experience terrorism and wars of religion) and a beauty both spiritual and physical that everyone admired. And it was precisely in Trent that Ercole died in March 1563, only after – however – holding a reception in honour of king Philip II of Spain: *un bal de cérémonie* to which the most genteel and eminent ladies of high society were invited. They danced, as cardinal Pietro Sforza Pallavicino reports, marrying modesty with dignity.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, this snapshot of dancing bishops and cardinals, with their red cassocks and mozzettas flapping around, is an image that we consider far removed from our modern way of thinking. But it faithfully reflects the worldly style which was then peculiar to the “way of life” of European nobles, whether laity or churchmen.

Obviously, early modern prelates often enjoyed such opportunities in their everyday existence: at court or in palaces, in urban vineyards (also sites of archaeological digs), in country seats (where they could gamble, fish or hunt), in spas, and in spaces used for musical, literary and theatrical

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Simon Ditchfield and Michael Knapton for their help in revising the translation.

<sup>2</sup> “Lauti banchetti, splendide feste”, G. Drei, *Il card. Ercole Gonzaga alla presidenza del Concilio di Trento*, «Archivio della Real Società Romana di Storia Patria», 1917, 40, pp. 205-223: 218.

<sup>3</sup> S. Ditchfield, *Of dancing Cardinals and Mestizo's Madonnas; Reconfiguring the History of Roman Catholicism in the Early Modern Period*, in “Journal of Early Modern History”, 8, 2004, pp. 386-408: 396.

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopédie méthodique. Arts académiques. Équitation, escrime, danse, et art de nager*, Paris, Panckoucke, 1786, p. 313. About Ercole Gonzaga: F. Rurale, *I cardinali di casa Gonzaga*, «Annali di storia moderna e contemporanea», 1995, 1, pp. 371-389; P. V. Murphy, *Ruling Peacefully. Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and Patrician Reform in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2007; his letters are in A. Segre, *Un registro di lettere del cardinale Ercole Gonzaga (1535-1536). Con un'appendice di documenti inediti (1520-1548)*, «Miscellanea di Storia Italiana», 1912, 16 (serie III), pp. 273-458: 278-279; F. Trapani, *Il cardinale Ercole Gonzaga in conclave (novembre 1549-febbraio 1550). Dai documenti mantovani*, Tesi di laurea magistrale, Università di Udine, aa 2012-2013, p. 165; *The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church*: <http://cardinals.fu.edu/bios1527.htm#Gonzaga>, *ad vocem*, consulted on 13 June 2020.

entertainments as well as socializing and “civil conversazione” (polite exchange). And these habits clearly continued unscathed by the Council of Trent.<sup>5</sup>

In Florence a few decades after the Council, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, we find Giacomo Peri and Giulio Caccini together performing Ottavio Rinuccini’s *Apollo e Dafne*, a work with amorous content. Among those present, not only the grand-duke and grand-duchess but also two cardinals, Francesco Maria Bourbon (Del Monte) and Felice Peretti di Montalto.<sup>6</sup> The work was staged in Mantua in 1608 by the impresario and composer cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga.<sup>7</sup>

Let us move briefly to France. The nineteenth century essayist Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, in his wonderful work on the Jansenist abbey of Port Royal (based on lectures first given in 1837-38), described the ballets organized by Cardinal Richelieu; these were attended by bishops, abbots, confessors and chaplains in seats especially reserved for them. Showing acute awareness of the mentality of the time, Saint-Beuve highlighted the words with which the aristocratic Francis de Sales (1567-1622), bishop of Geneva and later canonized, summed up the spirit of the religious orders then *à la mode* (and we should remember that he was talking about regular clergy, expected to follow a much stricter regime than their secular colleagues). Well, that spirit – as Francis confided to the abbess of the monastery, the heart of French Jansenism and later razed to the ground by Louis XIV – seemed to him «too refined, too courtly, too political».<sup>8</sup> The detail of his phrasing is significant: his reproof targeted an excess (“trop”/“too”), and not the substance of monks’ and nuns’ behaviour, which was therefore consistent with the spirit of their time: refined, courtly, political ... a perfect résumé!

#### *Rome, Mantua: sons, paintings of women, and love scenes*

Returning to sixteenth century Italy, the case of Cardinal Marco Sittico Altemps is equally illuminating. In the 1560s we find him wholly absorbed by family matters – a son to place, a wedding to organize. He had in fact to restore part of his villa at Mondragone (Frascati) for his son Roberto, recently married. And how did he think he should embellish the internal walls of the house? He had them decorated with scenes depicting warfare and love – another very striking summary of aristocratic values. This iconography represents the masculinity of medieval aristocratic knights as it shades into its early modern version, based on a new approach to educating young nobles and on different gender relations: an approach formulated by Francis de Sales in line with the well-established model proposed by Baldassare Castiglione and Stefano Guazzo.<sup>9</sup>

In the villa Cardinal Altemps went so far as to permit the depiction of Fiordispina’s same-sex passion for Bradamante, drawn from canto XXV of Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* – though in fact that tragic and impossible passion found a solution in the shrewd deceit thought up by Bradamante’s

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<sup>5</sup> “The ‘seriuos matters’ [...] seem to have been balanced by many hours available for lighter amusement [...] A great amount of time seems to have been spent just on strolls or coach rides around Rome and playing card or other games with fellow cardinals”, D. S. Chambers, *The ‘Bellissimo Ingegno’ of Ferdinando Gonzaga (1587-1626), Cardinal and Duke of Mantua*, «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», 1987, 50, pp. 113-147: 130-131.

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopédie méthodique. Arts académiques. Équitation, escrime, danse, et art de nager*, Paris, Panckoucke, 1786, p. 313.

<sup>7</sup> “Ferdinando’s Florentine contacts were of great benefit to Mantuan court entertainment [...] Rinuccini’s *Dafne* was performed, thanks to Ferdinando, in the Mantuan carnival of 1608 and Jacopo Peri, composer and tenor, wrote to congratulate the Cardinal on his production, which apparently included two of Ferdinando’s own compositions. Peri professed particularly to like an aria by Ferdinando with the first line ‘chi da lacci d’Amor’ [...] cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga] became an admirer of the Neapolitan singer Adriana Basile, ‘the siren of Posillipo’ who arrived in Rome in May 1610. At first he expressed himself more half-heartedly about her beauty than about her musical talent [...] Adriana herself reacted warmly to the charms of her new patron; she was even arch enough to say, when she was staying at Bracciano, that she would like to sleep in the bed which Ferdinando had once occupied ‘since it might induce in her some cardinal virtue or even enable her to conceive a little cardinal’”, Chambers, *The ‘Bellissimo Ingegno’*, pp. 125, 129.

<sup>8</sup> «Trop fin, trop courtisan et trop politique», Saint-Beuve, *Port Royal*, edited by M. Richter, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, I, pp. 356, 152.

<sup>9</sup> M. Hallenberg, *The Golden Age of the Aggressive Male? Violence, Masculinity and the State in Sixteenth Century Sweden*, «Gender & History», 2013, 25, pp. 132-149, see 132-133, 144: the period 1450-1650 “witnessed social upheavals that threatened the hegemonic masculinity of aristocratic knights [...] They were of course to be trained in the arts of war, but they should also travel and study at universities”; because “masculinities are not simply different but also subject to change”, R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic masculinity. Rethinking the Concept*, in «Gender and Society», 2005, 19, pp. 829-859, see 833, 835.

brother, Ricciardetto. Himself infatuated with Fiordispina, Ricciardetto succeeded in being mistaken at court for his sister Bradamante (the two were quite alike). But how could he explain to an incredulous and highly enamoured Fiordispina his new and unmistakable masculine characteristics, which he was soon to put to the test successfully? A miracle, no less, Ricciardetto tells her, the work of grateful nymphs ...<sup>10</sup>

But let us return to the Gonzagas, to cardinal Ercole. His virility was inexorable, we are told. His last lover seems to have been a Mantuan noblewoman. In the court proceedings she undertook to legitimise her last child, the cardinal's servant testified he had several times heard his master complain that he got his women pregnant on the first occasion of intercourse.<sup>11</sup> Ercole had no less than five children: Anna, Eleonora, Camillo, Elisabetta, Giulio Cesare, the last one born after his ordination as priest in 1556. For princes of the time, no matter whether laymen or churchmen, virility was expressed by the number of their children, both legitimate and illegitimate – sometimes dozens of them.<sup>12</sup> Besides, the Council of Trent had been called by pope Paul III Farnese, father to Pier Luigi, first duke of Parma and Piacenza; to stay vigorous, he used Greco wine from Somma Vesuviana to “bathe his masculine parts every morning”.<sup>13</sup>

Ercole Gonzaga was for many years regent of the Gonzaga dukedom after his brother Federico's death, and served as bishop-administrator of the diocese of Mantua from 1521 (while his episcopal consecration would arrive only forty years later). Prying into his behaviour necessarily entails encountering his mother, and what a mother: Isabella d'Este! The closeness that emerges between the two is somewhat surprising. Isabella was a woman of the world who attended Roman parties, met cardinals and popes, danced with them when they were disguised for carnival, and pleaded with Leo X for Ercole's appointment as cardinal. Eventually she made money available to pope Clement VII in the very middle of the horrendous Sack of Rome, in May 1527: the sum necessary to purchase her son's red hat.

In the following years Isabella maintained a very intense relationship with Ercole, as can be inferred from the correspondence between them. Isabella is a thoughtful and attentive mother who gives him presents, lends him money, asks about his love life and jokes with him. In 1536 she makes him a present of bed-linen, eliciting a confidential response both surprising and enlightening for modern

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<sup>10</sup> F. Grossi Gondi, *Le ville tuscolane nell'epoca classica. La villa dei Quintili e la villa di Mondragone*, Roma, Unione Cooperativa Editrice, 1901; F. Rurale, *The Roman Church and Sexuality: Some Notes about Prelates and Regular Clergy in Sixteenth-Seventeenth Century Italian Courts*, in M. L. Marshall-L. L. Carroll- K. A. McIver (eds.), *Sexualities, Textualities, Art and Music in Early Modern Italy*, Farnham-Burlington, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 117-129; D. Frascarelli, *L'arte del dissenso. Pittura e libertinismi nell'Italia del Seicento*, Torino, Einaudi, 2016, p. 35; J. Jeffries Martin, “Et nulle autre me fait plus proprement homme que cette cy”: *Michel de Montaigne's embodied masculinity*, «European Review of History», 2015, 22, pp. 563-578: 568-569: “stories of girls transformed into boys fascinated both Montaigne and his contemporaries [...] In the Essays [...] Montaigne accompanied [these stories] with several allusions to classical accounts of similar metamorphoses that he had found in Pliny and Ovid”.

<sup>11</sup> “I am every carrying this disgrace, that when I love a woman, I immediately get her pregnant!” in Murphy, *Ruling peacefully*, pp. 66, 54, 63, 64. P. Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: a Cultural History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 112-113: “[...] sex was likened to the conquest of a castle when Ludovico Ariosto imagined the fulfilment of desire in *Orlando Furioso* [...] Richardet fell upon an eager Fiordispina: he ‘leapt onto the battlements and planted my standard there at one jab, and thrust my enemy beneath me’ [...] Violence and aggression characterized many of the terms [...] for the sexual activity of the male genitals”.

<sup>12</sup> S. Bertelli, *Il corpo del re. Sacralità del potere nell'Europa medioevale e moderna*, Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1995, p. 160. Connell and Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, pp. 829- 859; Jeffries Martin, “Et nulle autre me fait plus proprement homme que cette cy”, p. 267: Montaigne “decries the way in which male fashion, namely the codpiece, exaggerates the size of the male member; [...] He expresses similar concerns about the well-endowed statues that are displayed in public in French cities, and he objects to the ways in which obscene graffiti “spread about the passages and staircases of palaces” also misled by exaggerating the size of the male member with the unhappy consequence that “women acquire a cruel contempt for our natural capacity.”

<sup>13</sup> “Bagnarsi le parti virili ogni mattina”, E. Cochrane, *L'Italia del Cinquecento*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1989 (orig. ed. New York, 1988), p. 197.

readers. Ercole, indeed, cannot but promise his mother – with unconcealed irony – that he will practise as much chastity as he can between those sheets so that she will not be party to his sins!<sup>14</sup>

Rome, where Ercole often went to attend the papal conclaves of the first half of the sixteenth century, provides a great deal of relevant evidence. As the cardinal's Mantuan agents wrote in their reports on Roman life, in this city you could see little else but

‘turning ladies’, as they [courtesans] are here called, where they are said to be more than twenty thousands, and one more beautiful and elegant than the other, whose houses everyone goes to without any concern. People drive around the city and the [antique] ruins in coaches with them, and in brief you cannot see anything else...’<sup>15</sup>

From the late middle ages to the eighteenth century, throughout the *ancien régime*, the Gonzaga princes created a veritable dynasty of cardinals among the offspring of the various branches of their house; with Rome the “theatre of European politics”, the cardinals were needed to look after Gonzaga interests. Ercole's successors to the see of Mantua were his nephews, cardinals Federico (1563) and Francesco; the latter was a son of Ferrante Gonzaga and, briefly, archbishop of Mantua until his death in 1566.<sup>16</sup> If we entered their apartments, we would see that they had inherited from Ercole tapestries, pictures, carpets, furnishings, as well as masquerade hats and masks. Here too we would be struck by the paintings on the walls. As well as portraits of two of Ercole's children – a “young son” and a daughter, nun in the St. Vincenzo convent – cardinal Federico displayed “fifteen small pictures of Lutheran heads” which had belonged to him.<sup>17</sup> The first two portraits were of children who should not have been sired by a Cardinal (though only ordained priest in 1556, Ercole Gonzaga had previously been a deacon); the other fifteen were of heretics, with many of whom Ercole had maintained relations, and in some cases friendship. Despite their subject matter, all these paintings were displayed for admiration in the residence of a young post-Tridentine cardinal of Holy Roman Church, who was proud of his uncle – a very handsome man, a cautious politician and, alas, the embodiment of an irrepressible masculinity.<sup>18</sup>

These churchmen also commissioned and collected paintings of women, “le belle” (“the beauties”), as they were called at that time: women portrayed in seductive garments and postures, like Artemisia

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<sup>14</sup> Segre, *Un registro di lettere*, p. 343; R. Brunelli, *I Gonzaga e la Chiesa, paesaggi di una relazione plurisecolare*, in *I Gonzaga e i papi. Roma e le corti padane tra Umanesimo e Rinascimento (1418-1620)*, edited by R. Salvarani, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, pp. 29-42, see 35.

<sup>15</sup> Trapani, *Il cardinale Ercole Gonzaga in conclave*, p. 170: “‘signore in volta’, per chiamarle come si nominano qui [le cortigiane], dove si dice che ve ne sono piu di XX mila, l'una più bella dell'altra et più ornata, in casa de' quali ogniuno va senza rispetto. Se va in cocchio per la citta et per le rovine [antiche] con loro et in summa non si vede altro”.

<sup>16</sup> F. Rurale, *I cardinali di casa Gonzaga*, «Annali di Storia moderna e contemporanea», 1995, 1, pp. 371-389.

<sup>17</sup> “Figliolo puttino”; “quindici quadri piccioli di teste di lutterani”, R. Brunelli, *Diocesi di Mantova. Dal Concilio di Trento alla caduta dei Gonzaga (1521-1707)*, in *Storia religiosa della Lombardia. Diocesi di Mantova*, a cura di A. Caprioli, A. Rimoldi, L. Vaccaro, Brescia, La Scuola, 1986, p. 117; C. M. Brown-G. Delmarcel (with the collaboration of A. M. Lorenzoni), *Tapestries for the Courts of Federico II, Ercole, and Ferrante Gonzaga, 1522-1563*, Seattle-London, College Art Association-University of Washington Press, 1996, p. 118

<sup>18</sup> His physical body must be considered “as performer of power” (see Simons, *The sex of men in Premodern Europe*, p. 4: “I believe it is time to return to men's physical bodies as performers of power”); that is to say the perfect opposite of men attracted by asexuality (P. H. Cullum, “Give Me Chastity”: *Masculinity and Attitudes to Chastity and Celibacy in the Middle Ages*, «Gender and History», 2013, 25, pp. 621-636, see 622), or marked by effeminacy (“Young men were less often warriors, more often courtiers. Thus, this was an era marked by “pervasive anxieties of effeminacy [...] as an older military aristocracy declined”, as Patricia Parker has noted, or even, more broadly, by a crisis of masculinity, Martin, “Et nulle autre me faict plus proprement homme que cette cy”, p. 564) or by impotence: Idem, p. 570: “Impotence was a matter of deep concern in early-modern Europe, and indeed there is some evidence that this was particularly true in Montaigne's own generation. On the one hand, this was a period marked by a significant increase in the number of court cases concerned with impotence – trials in which husbands were required to perform sexually in public to prove their capacity for love-making. On the other hand, in this very era, many women found themselves accused of witchcraft in order to explain the growing prevalence of impotence in the culture”.

Gentileschi's nude likeness of Cleopatra, which was prominently displayed in the rooms of the inquisitor cardinal Desiderio Scaglia.<sup>19</sup>

Display for admiration was equally the purpose of the tapestries (“arazzerie”) Ercole Gonzaga ordered in August 1558 for a palace of his in Rome. In this case – he now had a certain status and honour to protect, having finally celebrated his first Mass – he wanted reassurance that they did not represent “lustful things”.<sup>20</sup> The precise words Gonzaga used with his agent Bernardino Pia on this occasion render the image not only of the man, but of a whole age. They are indeed an effective summary of the main traits of the “shape of living” peculiar to Christian European aristocrats in the early modern age, remoulded to assimilate new gender relations but still within the landscape of patriarchal society with its contours of hierarchy and violence.<sup>21</sup>

Ercole asked his agent for “the finest tapestries you can find me”: only in this way could he suitably receive “every respected person who comes to pay court or talk to me”.<sup>22</sup> In these words laden with significance, the moment of meeting and relating with others is construed as the “art of pleasing in refined and worthy company [...] with due regard to differences and circumstances”; the contexts where that happened – “whether at court, in an academy, in a salon, or with family at home”<sup>23</sup> – were the ideal places for worldly “conversation”, functional to the creation and maintaining of power relations, and an essential occasion of Ancien Régime political dialectics.<sup>24</sup> Stefano Guazzo metaphorically shook hands with Baldassare Castiglione and monsignor Della Casa, while cardinal Giovanni Commendone observed the scene approvingly and drew from it general rules of behaviour, recommendations and advice.<sup>25</sup> Over the following centuries those tapestries were destined to circulate throughout Europe, and their traces would be lost only in revolutionary France.

#### *Laymen and clergymen: shared interests, roles and functions*

A first fact to underline is that in dealing with early modern Europe we must always be aware of the highly permeable cultural border – in its broadest sense – between the laity and the clergy. The common aristocratic matrix of laymen and clergymen destined to exercise authority in both secular courts and curial, spiritual environments, rather than differentiating their habits and lifestyle, tends to blur social differences which are merely apparent. In a nutshell: the overlap between lay and clerical status was still thoroughly evident. Laity and clergy shared values and behaviour, aspirations and mentality, characteristic of the “sistema del condominio aristocratico-mondano” (“system of shared aristocratic worldliness”). The

approaches to living among top-ranking churchmen [...] maintained their customary configuration, sharing in the princely style typical of the highest courtly circles in Renaissance Italy [...] Luxurious surroundings, ostentatious

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<sup>19</sup> Alvar Gonzáles-Palacios, *Vittorio amante di Cleopatra*, «ILSole24Ore», «Domenica», 4 February 2018, p. 29. See also: F. Petrucci, *Ferdinando Voet (1639-1689), detto Ferdinando dei Ritratti*, Roma, Ugo Bozzi, 2005; Idem, *Pittura di ritratto a Roma. Il Seicento*, Roma, Budai, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> “Cose lascive”, Murphy, *Ruling peacefully*, p. 107. “As Augustine had suggested, chastity and continence might be considered in youth, but more appropriately adopted in maturity”, Cullum, “Give Me Chastity”, p. 634.

<sup>21</sup> A. Quondam, *Forma del vivere. L'etica del gentiluomo e i moralisti italiani*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010; see M. Firpo and G. Maifreda, *Vivere (e morire) da cardinale. L'Inventario dell'eredità e la sepoltura di Giovanni Morone (1580-81)*, “Rivista Storica Italiana”, 2016, 118, pp. 5-51; p. 9: “emerge in tutta chiarezza il fastoso tenore di vita di un principe della chiesa” (“the sumptuous standard of living of a prince of the Church emerges very clearly”).

<sup>22</sup> «Le più belle tappezzerie che mi truovi»; «ogni persona onorata che venga per corteggiare o per parlarli», Murphy, *Ruling peacefully*, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> “Arte di piacere nelle belle e buone società [...] sotto il segno delle differenze e delle circostanze”; “la corte, l'accademia, il salotto, da una parte, e la famiglia e la casa, dall'altra”, A. Quondam, *Forma del vivere*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Bandino G. Zenobi, *Corti principesche e oligarchie formalizzate come “luoghi del politico” nell'Italia dell'età moderna*, Urbino, QuattroVenti, 1993.

<sup>25</sup> See: A. Quondam, *Stefano Guazzo e la Civil Conversazione*, 2 voll., Modena, F. Cosimo Panini, 1993; Idem, “Questo povero Cortegiano”. *Castiglione, il Libro, la storia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2000; C. Mozzarelli (a cura di), *Giovanni Francesco Commendone. Discorso sopra la corte di Roma*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1996; I. Botteri, *Galateo e galatei. La creanza e l'istituzione della società nella trattatistica tra antico regime e Stato liberale*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1999; M. Domenichelli, *Cavaliere e gentiluomo. Saggio sulla cultura aristocratica in Europa (1513-1915)*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2002.

magnificence, a sumptuous diet, hunting, good music and widely tolerated forms of amusement set a factual seal on the convergence of roles and prospects between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and lay aristocracy [...].<sup>26</sup>

The co-opting of clerics, set to occupy ruling positions in the Church, among the members of the aristocracy (at first the Roman senatorial and military nobility, then their German successors) dated back to the Church's origins, practically from when Christianity had become the State religion. The millennium thereafter had seen many changes, but the social provenance of the upper clergy of the western Church had remained the same. Equally unaltered were the means used to defend orthodoxy, that is coercion and violence, initially represented by the crudeness and intransigence of the Byzantine empire, inspiring the doctrinal definitions of the first general councils of the church, and then by Roman severity and inquisitorial repression. An account thereof has been provided, among others, by Giovanni Tabacco and Frederich Prinz.<sup>27</sup>

In brief, the head of the social pyramid, both lay and ecclesiastical, long maintained an undifferentiated complexion, and those who were part of it had these features in common:

- the pursuit of shared interests, first and foremost family and dynastic – the nepotism rampant in every court is proof of the kin-based familism which characterised nobles' strategies at every level of both State and Church;
- the sharing of activities, roles and functions – professional and social – at court, in the government of States, in diplomacy, in the scientific and literary callings, in patronage of the arts;
- the same educational paths, in the early modern age, through the boarding schools of the teaching orders or diocesan seminaries, in the *seminaria nobilium* and in university law and theology faculties, in academies both literary and scientific;
- the use of violence as a means for ruling and controlling, with frequently similar behaviour regarding the use of weapons<sup>28</sup> and, as we have already seen, in matters of sexual *mores*.

Among these common features, as the example of Ercole Gonzaga has already shown, was the incomplete or late incidence of priestly ordination among aristocratic cardinals. This was still evident a century and a half after Gonzaga's time (and after the Council of Trent), among the cardinals participating in the conclave of 1691, which ended with the election of pope Innocent XII: one out of five did not even have minor orders (that is of porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte).<sup>29</sup> Even in the Post-Tridentine church, indeed, many prelates did not want to be ordained *in sacris*, meaning that they did not wish to assume the status of priests, despite the fact that curial prelates were widely considered to be churchmen to all intents and purposes. While not wanting to be ordained deacons or priests, they nonetheless occupied benefices involving care of souls.<sup>30</sup> This situation and the choices determining it

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<sup>26</sup> D. Zardin, *Il rinnovamento religioso in Italia tra '4 e '500*, in *Storia religiosa dell'Italia*, I, a cura di L. Vaccaro, Milano, Centro Ambrosiano, 2016, pp. 261-287, p. 264: "la condizione di vita ai vertici della Chiesa [...] continuava a trovare la sua forma abituale di espressione nella condivisione dello stile principesco tipico delle più elevate cerchie cortigiane dell'Italia rinascimentale [...] Il lusso degli ambienti di vita, lo sfarzo appariscente, la ricchezza della buona tavola, la caccia, la buona musica e i divertimenti ampiamente tollerati erano il sigillo oggettivo di una convergenza di ruoli e di destino, fra gerarchie della Chiesa e aristocrazie laiche [...]"; Chambers, *The 'Bellissimo Ingegno' of Ferdinando Gonzaga*, thus describes the cardinal-duke Ferdinando Gonzaga: "Knight-Hospitaller or cripto-Jesuit, natural philosopher or jurist, poet, musical composer or impresario, priest or layman, passionate lover or dispassionate husband, Cardinal or Duke", p. 142.

<sup>27</sup> F. Prinz, *Clero e guerra nell'alto medioevo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1994 (orig. edition, Stuttgart 1971); G. Tabacco, *La metamorfosi del potere sacerdotale nell'alto medioevo*, a cura di G. G. Merlo, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2012 (the volume collects university lectures from the years 1973-76).

<sup>28</sup> G. Signorotto, *L'apprendistato politico di Teodoro Trivulzio, Principe e cardinale*, in *Testi e contesti. Per Amedeo Quondam*, C. Continisio-M. Fantoni (eds.), Roma, Bulzoni, 2015, pp. 291-313 (now, truly exemplary, see the item: Idem, *Trivulzio, Gian Giacomo Teodoro*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2020 (97), [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gian-giacomo-teodoro-trivulzio\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gian-giacomo-teodoro-trivulzio_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/)); on the overlapping of the two careers see also A. Cont, *Ascanio Gonzaga di Vescovato: dalla spada al pastorale (1654-1728)*, second part, *Il pastorale*, "Atti e memorie", Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Mantova, 2008 (76), pp. 131-176. Thank you, Gianvittorio, for your friendship!

<sup>29</sup> A. Menniti Ippolito, *Chierici e laici in età moderna. Introduzione al problema*, in "Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica", 2012, pp. 129-140, 130.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

caused no significant worries even for a man of the stature of the future Benedict XIV (pope from 1740 to 1758).<sup>31</sup>

As Antonio Menniti Ippolito has written, these prelates were not religious in the real meaning of this word. They often received major holy orders (sub-diaconate, diaconate, priesthood) and consecration as bishops just before their appointment to such offices as nuncio, archbishop or even pope. Their ecclesiastical careers could be broken off, they could be obliged to return to the secular world, as happened to Ferdinando Gonzaga at the beginning of the seventeenth century: he renounced his status as cardinal in 1615 and got his relative Vincenzo named in his stead – though Vincenzo in turn was then forced to resign as cardinal for having secretly married Isabella, the widow of Ferrante Gonzaga prince of Bozzolo.<sup>32</sup> In such cases of forced return to their families, priestly ordination would have caused serious problems for aristocratic churchmen: “lay status allowed for the eventuality of failure without the accompanying burden of the major constraints deriving from holy orders; it made everything lighter to bear, more manageable, and also less embarrassing for Rome”.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Laymen and clergymen: shared sexual behaviours*

All this had important consequences in many aspects of daily behaviour, including those pertaining to the sexual sphere, in which aristocratic churchmen acted as they did because they knew they were unable to resist the appeal of sexual relations, in line with the concern expressed by pope Pius II. Antonio Menniti Ippolito has written: “Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the fifteenth-century pope Pius II, did not feel strong enough long term to comply with the vow of chastity”.<sup>34</sup> The sharing in values and behaviour typical of nobles’ ‘way of life’ thus drove some of the higher clergy towards relationships with women and sexual conduct very similar to those of the lay aristocratic elite, as we saw with Ercole Gonzaga and Marco Sittico Altemps.

Let us look briefly at a lower level of the church, whose structure obviously incorporates major vertical differences. It was manifestly one thing to be the churchman presiding over the last session of the Council of Trent, as the noble cardinal Ercole Gonzaga did, and quite another to be a young clergyman like don Peninino in the small Friulan community of San Daniele in about 1700, attempting to assert his role as cleric (while also being an idler, a wanderer and a hireling).<sup>35</sup> But despite differences of level like this, the profile of priests in general emerges as endowed with masculinity in the sense of subjection to a *de facto* uncontrollable passion of the flesh, quite the opposite of sexless angels supposedly bound to chastity. That masculinity was indeed reinforced by priests’ dual matrix of authority: as males – we must never forget – in a patriarchal society, still profoundly violent towards woman, which even centuries of the Christian message had not succeeded in reshaping;<sup>36</sup> and as men of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, pp. 134-35.

<sup>32</sup> L. Cardella, *Memorie storiche de' cardinali di Santa Romana Chiesa*, VI, Roma, Stamperia Pagliarini, 1793, pp. 145, 182. Chambers, *The 'Bellissimo Ingegno'*, p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> Menniti Ippolito, *Chierici e laici*, pp. 134-136: “la dimensione laicale comportava la possibilità di poter fallire senza portarsi dietro il fardello di una condizione impegnativa quale lo *status* sacrale; rendeva tutto meno pesante, più agevole, anche meno imbarazzante per Roma”. See also F. Rurale, *I cardinali di casa Gonzaga*, “Annali di storia moderna e contemporanea”, 1995, I, pp. 371-389

<sup>34</sup> Menniti Ippolito, *Chierici e laici*, p. 133: “Enea Silvio Piccolomini, il quattrocentesco Pio II, non sentì a lungo la forza per rispettare l'obbligo di castità”.

<sup>35</sup> F. Rurale, *Clero “irregolare”. I “valori” del giovane don Peninino e le donne di San Daniele del Friuli (1697-1702)*, in *Uscire dalle regole. Scritti per Umberto Sereni*, P. Ferrari-B. Figliuolo (eds.), Udine, Forum, 2018, pp. 109-121.

<sup>36</sup> For a general framework, M. Cavina, *Nozze di sangue. Storia della violenza coniugale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 201; see U. Grassi, *Ambiguous Boundaries. Sex Crimes and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Early Modern Mediterranean World*, “Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni” 84 (2/2018) 513-528, p. 513-14: “sexual morality was much more open than we might expect it to have been, despite the religious interdictions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam”; an original point of view in J. Jeffries Martin, p. 566, 569 about Montaigne’s “reflections on gender and masculinity in which he destabilized the gender and sexual hierarchies of early-modern France”: “His *Essays*, especially the first edition of 1580, are marked by several passages that we might read as misogynistic and patriarchal, and Montaigne carries traces of these sentiments into the second edition of 1588. Nonetheless, the explicit thrust of his considerations on the relative qualities of men and women in the edition of 1588 is to emphasize the fundamental similarities between men and women [...] The *Essays* had at the very least provided the foundations for a profound reexamination of the relation of men to women in what was a profoundly patriarchal and hierarchal society [...] His goal here and in many other passages in which the penis played a prominent role was to prod his



God, intermediaries for all mortal women of things from on high, exerting their authority as clerics via forms of mediation comprising words and deeds, speeches and sermons, the sacrament of penance and the exercise of spiritual direction.<sup>37</sup>

Clergymen embodied the masculine power of priests capable of a virility which became irrepressible once expressed. And the appeal they emanated – at court, on the highway, in the confessional, in a square, in a private house, in a convent – was irresistible and anyway likely to assert itself, if necessary, by means of psychological pressure and violence. Those women who were not submissive but able to react to this, experienced incredulity, bewilderment, anger.

There is a well-known connection between ecstasy and mystic rapture, on the one hand, and their physical and orgasmic expression, on the other – sometimes the gap between the two experiences is indeed minimal – and that connection is emblematically represented by the carnal union between the spiritual director and his female penitent. We find full awareness of this at the beginning of the seventeenth century in the person of the Italian cardinal Desiderio Scaglia (1567-1639), author of a modern-sounding outburst against “insulse” (“fatuous”) women who were captured by implausible fantasies, easily swayed by the senseless reasoning of priests as ignorant as themselves, and unfortunately sometimes brought by those same priests to an ecstasy which was sexual rather than mystical. The “suntuose penetrazioni” (“sumptuous penetrations”) of their stories and letters reached the attention of the judges and inquisitors who prosecuted in cases of *sollicitatio ad turpia* by clergymen.<sup>38</sup>

In other situations, in a perfect match between religiosity and sexuality, ecstatic rapture implied sexual fantasies with Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints as their main characters. Masturbation by women could set off erotic communion with a whole line-up of holy figures, including Christ and the Virgin Mary.<sup>39</sup> Agustina Ruiz, brought to trial by the Inquisition in Mexico in 1621, “said that the painting was so beautiful that she fell intensely in love with the saint. In her third confession she related that that night, ‘with this image [in mind,] she went to her house and that same night, lying in bed while she began to touch her shameful parts in order to pollute herself’”.<sup>40</sup> Carnal love as an expression of mystical union can indeed originate from the fervour and desire aroused by a painting, a fresco, religious iconography.<sup>41</sup> If Christ is the Beloved, how can this love not translate into carnal form as well? How can the overlap between physical and spiritual joy be stopped? How can the language of mysticism in every age be prevented from using metaphors that are passionate and sometimes erotic: the meeting of hearts, marriage with Christ, absolute desire both carnal and spiritual, immersion, saint Teresa of Avila’s “penetration of inner organs”,<sup>42</sup> definitive fusion with the body of the Spouse, absolute love for Him? This is the matrix of the dangerous and disruptive mingling of desire, ecstasy and pleasure.

So as well as women appearing before the court of the Holy Office (as victims or witnesses, and more rarely as complainants), we find members of the secular and religious orders, summoned to

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readers to rethink masculinity”. “Connell has also suggested that ‘the long sixteenth century’ saw the formation of the modern gender order through a series of upheavals that eventually strengthened both the patriarchal order and the power of the centralised state”, M. Hallenberg, *The Golden Age of the Aggressive Male? Violence, Masculinity and the State in Sixteenth-Century Sweden*, “Gender and History”, 2013, vol. 25, pp. 132-149, see p. 133 .

<sup>37</sup> R. W. Connell-James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the concept*, “Gender and Society”, 2005, vol. 19, pp. 829-859: 832: “Hegemonic [masculinity] ... meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion”.

<sup>38</sup> A. Biondi, *L’“inordinata devozione” nella Pratica del cardinal Scaglia (ca. 1635)*, in *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, G. Zarri (ed.), Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991, pp. 306-325, see p. 307; G. Romeo, *Esorcisti, confessori e sessualità femminile nell’Italia della controriforma. A proposito di due casi modenese del primo Seicento*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Z. Tortorici, *Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire: Connecting Sexuality and Religiosity in Colonial Mexico*, “Journal of the History of Sexuality”, 2007, 16, p. 355.

<sup>40</sup> Tortorici, *Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire*, p. 369.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi; see M. Corry, *The Alluring Beauty of a Leonardesque Ideal: Masculinity and Spirituality in Renaissance Milan*, “Gender and History”, 2013, 25, pp. 565-589: “I will explore the manner in which the devotional efficacy of these images depended on the deliberate evocation of both spiritual and secular attitudes to beautiful male bodies [...] These images have a self-conscious sensual appeal” pp. 568, 576.

<sup>42</sup> Tortorici, *Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire*, p. 368: “Just as Agustina Ruiz [defendant in a Mexican Inquisition trial in 1621] used language of penetration to describe the simultaneous physical and spiritual love of Jesus for her, Saint Teresa of Avila told of how a beautiful angel with his great golden spear ‘plunged [it] into my heart several times, so that it penetrated to my entrails’”.

defend themselves against very serious charges relating to crimes caused by their sexual cravings. Giulio Mazzarino was a renowned Jesuit, a famous preacher, who exercised so much ascendancy over gentlewomen in the Milan of Carlo Borromeo, that they not only flocked to his sermons in Santa Maria in Brera, near the Jesuit college, but lavished care on his wardrobe: they had shirts tailored for him and one or two of them, according to the testimony of a fellow Jesuit, would easily have fallen in love with him... Father Mazzarino moved often from one pulpit to another, from one court to another. He was accused of *sollicitatio* by three young nuns of Reggio Emilia, and preliminary proceedings between May and June 1596 saw a sequence of testimony for both the prosecution and the defence, especially by three sisters of the Franciscan third order, between 20 and 30 years of age, who accused him of shameful and vile behaviour towards them in the confessional. There followed his trial and acquittal, the latter favoured by the intervention of his friend and fellow student, Robert Bellarmine (the future cardinal and saint). It was suspected that the whole case had arisen from malicious gossip and also from jealousy towards him by some of the fathers of the Jesuit college: someone, it was said, wanted to muddy his reputation.<sup>43</sup>

*The archival records of the Holy Office of Udine*

For many cases, trial records are preserved among the documents in the Archive of the Archiepiscopal Curia of Udine; they concern confessors belonging to the secular clergy and to various religious orders – the Carmelites, Capuchins and Franciscans. Confessionals, the private houses of penitent women and nunneries are revealed as places of temptation and scenes of crime, with women almost always the victims, unaware of what was happening and almost incredulous, but nonetheless able to react when their education gave them the strength to do so, in the form of denunciations presented to the authorities.

In 1697 inquiries by the Holy Office of Udine involved don Giovanni Andrea Peninino and a teacher of San Daniele del Friuli, Dorotea Monsuti. The evidence speaks of uninhibited impudence, displays of masculinity among young colleagues in public places, lay and religious students' ready and unbecoming witticisms at the expense of young women coming to draw water from the well: the description of an anthropologically unchanging masculine universe, depressingly always the same. Don Andrea's priapism meant he was in constant need of sexual satisfaction, which he sought obsessively among more mature women, and this created turmoil among the female component of the small community he lived in. The priest made the mistake, in due course, of assailing a woman with a certain degree of education who taught catechism in the local confraternity. Dorotea was in fact able to question the sort of deceit based on moral and theological dialectics that clergymen, including don Peninino, would often boast, counting on the authority of their cassocks and their status as clerics. In such deceits they would dissert using the dialectical methods of casuistry and probabilism, arguing for the venial nature of the sin committed, even quoting the testimony of their theologian colleagues in support of the legitimacy of their sexual cravings, and – finally – telling these hapless women not to report what had happened to their confessors. Dorotea, though, did succeed in the end in confiding in her spiritual director, who invited her to report what had happened; then, despite hesitation and errors, she took the most difficult step, and filed a formal complaint.

The archival records of the Holy Office of Udine also cast some light on the role played by women in these cases. It was not always passive, and what sometimes emerges is their complicity and agreement, their shared feeling and affection. There are even just a few cases which attest women's intention to seduce. It could in fact happen that women, not men, set the pace, and this was partly true with don Peninino. While still an adolescent he had relished the qualities of an older, experienced woman who managed to set him at his ease, sought to heal him with her herbs and introduced him to pleasure. In other cases, women reported clerical lovers only after experiencing betrayal of the trust they had given, when their sorrow, anger and outrage culminated in accusation. Brother Andrea, my

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<sup>43</sup> F. Rurale, *Mazzarino, Giulio*, "Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani", 72, Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2009, pp. 528-531; F. Rurale, *I gesuiti a Milano. Religione e politica nel secondo Cinquecento*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1992, p. 165; In Milan's Jesuit University there were Ovidio's *Ars amatoria*, "Marziale not censured" and Petronius' *Satyricon*: books kept "in locked cases, but available under licence from the rector".

beloved – Giulia Rosaria told the Udine inquisitor in January 1657 – had told a fellow friar of his to kiss me on his behalf ... an indecent proposal!<sup>44</sup>

The original sin, so to speak, lay in the clerical vow of abstinence and obligation of celibacy, this latter confirmed at Trent: no easy condition to endure for churchmen who for centuries had been accustomed to domestic cohabitation with women.<sup>45</sup> As we know well, the norms concerning this had been defined only in the second millennium of the Christian era, after centuries of debate and division. As early as the very first church councils (Elvira 306, canon 33) bishops, priests and deacons had been banned from having sexual intercourse and procreating with their wives (“continent, chaste marriage”). Celibacy was debated at Carthage, in 390. But the Church Father’s opinions had long remained discordant: in the East they were in practice opposed to celibacy (in 697 the Trullan Council eventually legitimated marriage and children, creating a cause of the eleventh-century schism between the Eastern and Latin Churches)<sup>46</sup>.

Prohibitions pertaining to sexual intercourse and the annulment of marriages contracted by clerics in major holy orders were in fact proclaimed in various geographical areas over the centuries, a datum which confirms the absence of a common norm and the existence of different practices within the Christian oecumene. Censorial rulings by Church Councils (for example, the second and fourth Lateran Councils, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries<sup>47</sup>) ran counter to a reality full of contradictions. The fourth Lateran Council stigmatised incontinence (meaning sexual intercourse separate from marriage) by clerics who had received permission to continue in their conjugal unions. A few decades later, in the second Council of Lyon, there was talk of depriving bigamous clerics of their privileges. In 1457, during an inspection of seventy-eight Basilian monasteries in Calabria and Campania ordered by pope Callixtus III, many monks were found to have concubines and children. And subsequent to Trent, German and French synods of the seventeenth century complained about the presence of clergy with concubines, and priests who called their women their wives<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> ACAU (Archive of the Diocesan Curia of Udine), “Sant’Ufficio”, b. 1318.

<sup>45</sup> “The Catholic priesthood retained masculinity [...] While the laity (and the ecclesiastical authorities) might want them to be angels, the clerics (especially those ordained to a career rather than a vocation) often failed in their obligations [...], R. N. Swanson, *Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation*, in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, cit., pp. 160-177; clergy “proceeded to observe the letter but not the spirit of the legislation, by not marrying, but keeping a mistress or concubine, or by visiting prostitutes”, P. H. Cullum, “Give Me Chastity”: *Masculinity and Attitudes to Chastity and Celibacy in the Middle Ages*, “Gender and History”, 2013, vol. 25, pp. 621-636: 622; but “to avoid being ‘not-man-enough’ it might be necessary to be ‘too-masculine-by-half’”, P.H. Cullum, *Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England*, in D. M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, London and New York, Longman, 1999, pp. 178-196, see 196.

<sup>46</sup> E. Romeo, *Lui, Dio e Lei. Il problema del celibato nella Chiesa*, Catanzaro, Rubettino, 2018, cap. 2. See also: M. Foucault, *Le combat de la Chasteté*, in «Communications», 35 (1982), *Sexualités occidentales*; about the struggle to achieve chastity, F. Alfieri, *Il corpo negato. Tre discorsi sulla castità in età moderna*, Bologna, Edizioni Dehoniane, 2014, p. 9; S. T. Salvi, “Diabolo suadente”. *Celibato, matrimonio e concubinato dei chierici tra Riforma e Controriforma*, Milano, Giuffrè, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> The decrees of the two councils: [www.intratext.com/IXT/ITA0138/PE.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ITA0138/PE.HTM); <http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0065/P2.HTM>, documents accessed on 17 June 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Romeo, *Lui, Dio e Lei*, cap. 2. G. Romeo, *Amori proibiti*; Michele Mancino, Giovanni Romeo, *Clero criminale. L'onore della Chiesa e i delitti degli ecclesiastici nell'Italia della Controriforma*, Roma, Laterza, 2013; and the documents in Idem, *I documenti: il Cinquecento*, Napoli, FedOAPress, 2014, pp. 36, 53, 68.